



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## CHILD LABOR AT THE NATIONAL CAPITAL

---

By Hon. CHARLES P. NEILL, Ph.D.,  
Commissioner of Labor, Washington, D. C.

---

Ever since I was requested by the National Child Labor Committee to discuss the topic: Child Labor at the National Capital, I have been condoled with by numerous friends. There seems to be a feeling everywhere in Washington that we have no child labor here, and that to be asked to discuss such a topic is like being asked to write a chapter on snakes in Ireland. But Washington from time to time awakens to the fact that it has an imperfection or two which it had previously overlooked. We have in some respects a model city, and are proud—warrantably proud, I believe—of the reputation of being probably the best governed city in the United States. In all that makes for material beauty and honest administration there is room for little but praise of the nation's capital. But there are phases of our city life, phases of what we might call its sociological or its moral side in which we are remarkable chiefly for the absence of any preventive legislation and remarkable, I might say, for our complete ignorance of the sores that disfigure what is otherwise an unusually clean and healthful civic society. When some years ago an awakening and a developing of social conscience in our large centers of population led to the study of those festering spots we call slums and to efforts for their eradication, Washington looked on with interest, with approving interest, wished the work God speed—and complacently thanked the Lord that it was not as other cities. It came to many of us, therefore, with a peculiar shock when some of those who had led the movement against the slums of London and New York came to Washington, and turning aside from the broad avenues and park-bedotted sections of the city, went nosing into crooked alleys and dirty by-ways, and then

emerged to tell us that scattered here and there through the city were plague spots in which the living conditions of human beings were as deplorable and as fearful as almost anything that could be found in the worst parts of New York or London. The differences were in degree and not in kind. We had not as much of it as those larger centers of population, but what we had was as bad—and what is more, with us there is far less excuse for the existence of such conditions.

I believe that the case is pretty nearly parallel in the matter of child labor. Here, too, we fancy we are innocent of all guilt. But our complacency on this score is due largely to a disordered mental perspective. The pallid, overworked, stunted child of the mill, the factory, or the mine has been held up so often as an example of the evil of child labor that anything short of this pitiful, this shocking little human figure fails to draw our particular attention. We have here no yawning mills, or factories, or mines, in and out of which emerges a daily procession of those little victims to whose rescue this National Committee has dedicated its unremitting efforts.

Washington is pre-eminently a residence and not an industrial center, and the opportunity to make use of child labor is consequently limited, but in so far as there have been openings we have let pass no chance for sinning against our children. We have risen, or perhaps I had better say, we have stooped to the complete measure of our opportunity. We cannot vie with the States or cities that number their working children by the tens of thousands, but in the restricted area of Washington, with its comparatively small population, we have them by the dozens and by the hundreds, and what is more, we have here forms of child labor that are—or ought to be—shocking beyond expression to any right-thinking man or woman,—and these we have tolerated without having written one word of protest in our laws. So far as I have been informed, we have no law or regulation of any kind in the nation's capital imposing restrictions of any sort upon the employment of children.

It would at any time be a matter of some difficulty to secure complete data concerning the employment of children here. I would have been glad to present here the results of a comprehensive investigation into child labor in the District of Columbia, but when the matter was brought to my attention the meeting

of this committee at Washington had been well advertised, and it would have been extremely difficult, in the absence of any law on the subject, and the consequent absence of records, to have made successfully a complete investigation of this topic. The very coming of the committee had directed attention to the subject, with the natural result that inquiries would have been everywhere met with suspicion, and the facts could not easily have been drawn out. But the briefest and most casual investigation of the subject has brought to light enough to make Washington heartily ashamed of itself, and to demand that the moral sense of the community shall express itself and be written into law.

The census of 1900 shows over 2000 children under 15 years of age engaged in gainful occupations in the District of Columbia. The percentage of children under 15 at work in 1900 was nearly double the percentage at work in 1880. And judging by the hasty survey we have made during the last few weeks there is every reason to believe that the evil is still rapidly spreading.

The only effort that has been made to cope with the evil is a weak one, and represents the application of the poultice rather than of the knife. We have realized the injury done the child and the injury done to the community by allowing educational opportunities to be withdrawn from children at too early an age, but we have not taken a determined stand and prohibited child labor and demanded that the child should be sent regularly to school. We have merely temporized with the evil by starting night schools for those unfortunate little fellows who are compelled to work during the study and the play hours of normal child life. At the opening of the night schools this year 655 children 15 years and under had enrolled themselves for study. All of these are children who labor during the hours of daylight, and the extent of the relief we offer them is to permit them to devote to study whatever of energy and strength may be left after a day's work is ended. It may be—I do not know—but it may be that the records of the children in the night schools in many cases compare favorably with the records of the children in the day school; but I do not believe that anyone would call for figures to justify the statement that any child who is working six, eight, or ten hours a day is fit to devote several hours more in the evening to mental work. By dint of pluck and  
(272)

energy such a child may succeed well in his study for a while, but in the long run, in the great majority of cases, the result **cannot** fail to be harmful, both mentally and physically.

We have found cases in the past few weeks of children twelve years old attending night school after working from 7.30 in the morning to 5.30 in the evening. And this was work in laundries and in small factories in which this entire period was devoted, except for the lunch hour, to continuous work.

Is it surprising then when the principal of a night school tells us that night after night before the school session is half over little fellows ask to be excused on the ground that they are too tired to remain longer awake. Nor is it any wonder either that these little fellows whom we permit to work nine or ten hours and to whom we then—in our generosity—offer school facilities, if they will do what is equivalent to adding two or three more hours to their day's work—is it any wonder, I say, that they finally spurn this generous treatment and cease to avail themselves of all that we are offering them.

The records of the present year show very clearly that the children do not avail themselves very long of the opportunities offered by the night school. Of the 655 children now attending these schools practically eighty per cent. have only been out of the day school one year or less. In other words, of the entire attendance less than one-fifth have been attending these schools for two years or over. These figures show conclusively that the children do not continue at night school after they have begun to work, and that practically the beginning of their working life is the ending of their school life.

I said that we had found 12-year-old boys in this district working from 7.30 in the morning until 6 in the evening, but cases have also been found of 12-year-old boys who have worked from 7.30 in the morning till 5.30 in the evening and have returned in the night to work from 7.30 till 10, making a thirteen-hour day for a 12-year-old-child. I do not know how many of these cases there are, for, as I have said, our investigation was a very limited and superficial one. But even if the number should not prove large, we have no occasion to take credit to ourselves for the fact. A community which will permit a single case of this kind to exist, a community that has not written one line into its law to prevent

the existence and the growth of such conditons, has little right to point the finger of shame at those other communities where mills destroy the children by the thousands. The difference in their respective sinning is only in degree.

Right now there are small factories in the District where 12 and 13-year-old boys are working from 7.30 o'clock in the morning till 5 in the evening, nine hours a day, and then returning to work again from 6 until 9 o'clock at night.

Dwarfed and stunted children are sad enough spectacles, but a moral wreck is sadder, infinitely sadder, than any type of physical deformity. There are in the District of Columbia half a dozen forms of child labor which necessarily and inevitably will turn out each year a goodly proportion of moral wrecks.

Hardly any one would argue that the lobby of a hotel with the ribald jest and the obscene yarn which pass current there when men of a certain type are passing the early or the later hours of the evening is any fit place for a young boy, but the hotels of this city employ children twelve, thirteen and fourteen years of age in occupations which from the viewpoint of moral insurance can only be classed as extra hazardous.

At 11 o'clock at night I have seen a twelve-year-old boy, employed around the lobby of a hotel, sitting just behind a pair of red-faced men, drinking in eagerly the dirty stories which they were exchanging with one another. The opportunity doubtless presents itself night after night, and the little boy doubtless too avails himself of it. Again, the little page boys of the hotel who go through the various parts of the hotel calling telephone messages and telegrams are sent night after night into rathskellers and cafes in which men and women of at least questionable reputation are giving object lessons of a sort which every intelligent parent would spend every effort to hide from thirteen-year-old children. In the various theaters, too, will be found little boys dressed up as pages who carry water around to the patrons of the theater. I think we would all agree that a theater, even of the best type, is hardly the place for the budding nature of a boy to develop into fullness.

In looking up instances of child labor here, I visited what I thought was probably the worst theater in the city. It is not so bad perhaps as the kind some other cities might boast of, but it is fair to describe it as the kind of a place where the lecherous and

the sodden seek their evening's entertainment. The candy seller here was a boy who might have been fourteen. I found him eagerly taking in the performance, and somewhat shocked at the thought that a boy of his age should spend night after night in such surroundings, I made inquiry of an attendant who knew him as to the boy's family circumstances. His father was living—but was in the penitentiary. Criminologists may differ as to the relative importance of heredity and environment in shaping the lives of men; but here was a case of a child cursed with whatever burden heredity might have, and whom the community had also allowed to seek an environment that would co-operate with hereditary traits to work for his moral destruction. It does not require the gift of prophecy to suggest that at a later day this community will complete its outrage on that child by sending him successively to the reform school and later to the penitentiary.

I think it is generally admitted by all those who have given any study to the question of child labor that what we term the street trades are particularly dangerous to the morals of children, and in these trades the Capital City can furnish some excellent examples of what ought not to be tolerated.

Although the street trades in Washington engage only one-fourth of the total number of children engaged in all occupations, yet of the number of children under fifteen who have gone to the reform school, or who have been turned over by the courts to the care of probation officers, over two-thirds have come from the ranks of the children engaged in the street trades. These figures are not surprising to any one who has made the least study of child labor, for it is found true everywhere that the street trades serve as a preparatory school for crime.

At nearly every corner of the busy part of the city there are literally dozens of boys of all ages selling the morning and the evening papers. There are frequently anywhere from six to ten doing the work that a single one could properly do. Their work lacks all the disciplinary value that comes from a steady employment and fixed earnings. Success does not come to a boy from strict attention to business and from the possession of the characteristics of reliability and steadiness. It comes from the skill with which he can outwit his rival and the quickness with which he turns a penny—honestly or dishonestly.

Anyone who will notice carefully the boys from whom he buys his papers from day to day will observe how often the boy is without change for the five cents we offer him for his paper. Unwilling to wait, we tell him to keep the change. If there ever was a mistaken charity, this is one, for the boy learns quickly that more money is to be made in illegitimate than in legitimate ways. Had he made the change his profit on the sale of his paper would have been half a penny; his failure to have the change has given him four cents extra. Speaking in the language of trade, his profit increased 800 per cent. Before long the little boy intentionally delays making the change and goes through various skillful devices to try your patience—or to give you plenty of time in which to let your generosity develop to the point of letting him keep the change. If the street car is going by, and you show an inclination to make that car, the boy sees his chance and delays his change. This of course is not true of every boy, for there are many little fellows who will follow you to the car and run along beside it to give you the last penny; but the temptation is there, and dozens and dozens of the little fellows fall before it. Again, no one can walk the streets of this city after dark without meeting little boys, sometimes as young as seven and eight years of age, who come up and beg you, "Please, mister, buy my last paper; it is only a penny!" I have seen boys repeat this several times in succession, drawing a fresh paper out from under their jacket as soon as the purchaser of the last one had disappeared. At the junction of two of our principal streets, almost any night at 8, 9 and even 10 o'clock, a little boy who says he is only six years old can be found begging you to buy his "last paper."

Unless the child is cast in the mold of heroic virtue, the newsboy trade is a training in either knavery or mendicancy. Nowhere else are the wits so sharpened to look for the unfair advantage, nowhere else is the unfortunate lesson so early learned that dishonesty and trickery are more profitable than honesty, and that sympathy coins more pennies than does industry.

But bad as the newsboy's training is, demoralizing as it is, there is another service in the District which surpasses even this in its opportunities for moral injury. The newsboys' service is demoralizing, but the messenger service is debauching.

There are messenger boys here of ten and eleven years old,



and these little fellows may be seen at all hours of the day and night in all kinds of weather, working manfully at their tasks. Their hours of work run on an average from seven to nine hours a day. Some of the boys start at 7 o'clock in the morning and work until 4 in the afternoon. Others come on at 8 or 9 and work correspondingly later hours in the afternoon. Other boys begin as late as 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon and work until midnight. Others begin at midnight and work until 8 in the morning. The dangers of this service are hard to overestimate. Boys are sent at all hours of the day and night indiscriminately into all sorts of places, and after the boy has added to his own experiences the experiences he secures through the exchange of confidences with his little fellow-workers his education has proceeded very far in those lines in which we strive the hardest to limit knowledge amongst children.

Washington, like every other city, has a section which is without the law; it is fenced off, as it were, and into it is crowded all that is pathetic, all that is tragic, all that is foul in the life of woman. The name of this section of our cities is not referred to, nor its character discussed before any general audience. It can truly be described as a place which is unspeakable, yet in that district in Washington practically every disreputable house has its call box, and any creature, however foul, has but to press a button and a moment later a boy is sent from a messenger office to place himself at her service for any errand of sin that she may wish. No discrimination seems to be exercised even as to the age of the children that are sent to answer these calls. By the common testimony of nearly every police officer in that precinct boys as young as ten and eleven years can be seen answering calls to these houses day after day and night after night. And, saddest of all, this service appeals strongly to the children. The prurient curiosity of the developing boy would itself incline him to like these calls, but they quickly learn also that women who live in these sections are more generous with their earnings in the way of tips than are the people in the more respectable sections of the city. Frequently two or three little boys will be seen trailing after one another in answer to a single call—each hoping that the generosity of the woman will extend beyond the boy who carries her message to his companions who wear the uniform. One little boy who was ques-

tioned in this investigation had been very fortunate on that particular day. He had had several calls in that section and had made \$1.50 in tips. He did not realize, and perhaps the "widowed mother" to whose support he was contributing did not realize, the real source of his earnings. This money did not represent legitimate salary paid him for honest services rendered, but it represented such a division of the earnings of shame as an abandoned woman chose of her own free will to bestow upon the child.

It is bad enough to send boys of any age into such a service as I am describing, but it is unspeakably shocking to find that no discrimination whatever seems to be exercised in regard to the ages of the children who are sent to houses of prostitution in answer to calls. It may be a ten-year-old boy or it may be a seventeen-year-old boy—chance alone seems to determine.

It can be said that all the boys who go into the messenger service do not go to the bad, but it can be said with equal truth that it ruins children by the dozens, and that if any boy does come out of this service without having suffered moral shipwreck he can thank the mercy of God for it, and not the protecting arm of the community that stands idly by and makes no attempt to save him from temptation.

In conclusion I would like to suggest a reflection or two for this or any other body of men and women that considers the question of child labor. Let us ask ourselves, Whose is the responsibility? For whom do these children work? Let us cast off for a moment the scandalous aspects of the messenger service which I have just been discussing and consider only forms of labor in legitimate lines. The truth is, these child victims are working for us. They are working for me, and they are working for you. We enjoy cheaper products because the rights of children are outraged in order to furnish cheap labor. We cannot turn around and lay the blame entirely on the greed of the employer. Wherever shameful conditions of child labor exist it is due just as much to a lack of conscience in the community at large as it is to any greed on the part of particular employers.

After all has been said, and the case weighed, no valid excuse can be allowed for child labor. The arguments in favor of it reduce themselves to two. The first is that the child's family needs his earnings. But even this is not true in the majority of cases.

Investigations everywhere confirm the fact that in the larger number of instances of child labor the families could have gotten on without it; and even if misfortune and want have reached the point which seemed to demand the labor of the little children of a family, it is mistaken policy to permit this method of relief. The community that has no other form of relief to offer the widow deprived of her natural bread-winner than to snatch her children from her and place upon their shoulders burdens that belong to men is a community that is not very far advanced in either Christian charity or economic intelligence.

A broader ground is sometimes taken, and it is urged that certain forms of industry cannot be carried on without child labor. Now, if there is any one proposition in economics that all are agreed upon it is that any individual or any community will pay for any service or for any commodity just the value that the service or the commodity represents. If any individual or any community, therefore, will not pay enough for a service to justify the employment of men instead of children, then it goes without saying that the service is not of much importance to such individual or such community, that they will suffer little loss if deprived of it.

There is one further consideration that it seems to me is particularly pertinent in connection with the annual meeting of the National Child Labor Committee. There are communities, I believe, in which the activities of the Committee are resented on the ground that the community insists on its rights to manage its own affairs without what it is pleased to term outside interference. In the last analysis this usually means that the community insists on its right to debauch its humanity and to demoralize its coming citizens without protest from other human beings that chance to live beyond the bounds of an arbitrary political division. But Washington can make no such claim. We are not responsible for our home government. The President of the United States and the National Congress represent the real government of our city. The citizens of the country at large select our chief officer and our lawmakers for us, and if they fail to make laws that measure up to what the Child Labor Committee feels are necessary it is perfectly within the sphere of its rights to enter its protest and to make its suggestions.

Washington, as the nation's capital, and, governed as it is by the selected and collective intelligence of the country at large,

should be a model in everything that pertains to civic advancement. It should have a model child labor law, and the mere fact that our children are being sacrificed only by dozens instead of by hundreds and by thousands, as they are in other places, is a poor plea to enter in justification of the absence of any child labor legislation in the District of Columbia. In Washington there is little excuse for child labor; here it has not yet secured the foothold that it has in other places; here it has not yet arrayed behind it interests that do not wish to be disturbed, and for these very reasons we should now draft and place upon our statute books a model child labor law that would serve as a guide and an encouragement to other and less fortunate communities which are beginning their struggle against an already intrenched evil.